811.5
M571w
c.2

UNIVERSITY
OF FLORIDA
LIBRARIES

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2012 with funding from
LYRASIS Members and Sloan Foundation

http://archive.org/details/waterstreetpoems00merr

WATER STREET

BOOKS BY JAMES MERRILL

POETRY

Water Street 1962

The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace 1959

First Poems 1951

A NOVEL

The Seraglio 1957

WATER STREET

POEMS BY

JAMES MERRILL

ATHENEUM *NEW YORK*
1962

After Greece, The World and the Child, Getting Through, and *Swimming by Night* first appeared in THE NEW YORKER. Other poems are reprinted by courtesy of the following: HUDSON REVIEW, LOCUS SOLUS, THE NATION, THE NEW YORK TIMES, PARTISAN REVIEW, PERSPECTIVE, POETRY, and THE QUARTERLY REVIEW OF LITERATURE.

Copyright © 1960, 1961, 1962 by James Merrill
All rights reserved
Library of Congress catalog card number 62-17282
Published simultaneously in Canada by McClelland & Stewart Ltd.
Manufactured in the United States of America by
Clarke & Way, New York
Designed by Harry Ford
First Printing September 1962
Second Printing December 1962

CONTENTS

AN URBAN CONVALESCENCE 3
FROM A NOTEBOOK 7
A VISION OF THE GARDEN 8
POEM OF SUMMER'S END 9
AFTER GREECE 12
THE GRAND CANYON 14
PRISM 16
FOR PROUST 18
SCENES OF CHILDHOOD 20
THE LAWN FETE OF HOMUNCULUS ARTIFEX 25
THE WORLD AND THE CHILD 27
CHILDLESSNESS 28
GETTING THROUGH 30
FIVE OLD FAVORITES:
A DREAM OF OLD VIENNA 32
THE MIDNIGHT SNACK 33
SUNDOWN AND STARLIGHT 34
EVENT WITHOUT PARTICULARS 35
THE DANDELION SERMON 36
ROGER CLAY'S PROPOSAL 37
THE RECONNAISSANCE 38
THE WATER HYACINTH 39
ANNIE HILL'S GRAVE 41
ANGEL 42
TO A BUTTERFLY 43
THE PARROT FISH 45
LETTER FROM EGYPT 46
THE SMILE 48
SWIMMING BY NIGHT 50
A TENANCY 51

WATER STREET

FOR ROBERT AND ISABEL,
ELEANOR AND GRACE

AN URBAN CONVALESCENCE

Out for a walk, after a week in bed,
I find them tearing up part of my block
And, chilled through, dazed and lonely, join the dozen
In meek attitudes, watching a huge crane
Fumble luxuriously in the filth of years.
Her jaws dribble rubble. An old man
Laughs and curses in her brain,
Bringing to mind the close of *The White Goddess*.

As usual in New York, everything is torn down
Before you have had time to care for it.
Head bowed, at the shrine of noise, let me try to recall
What building stood here. Was there a building at all?
I have lived on this same street for a decade.

Wait. Yes. Vaguely a presence rises
Some five floors high, of shabby stone
—Or am I confusing it with another one
In another part of town, or of the world?—
And over its lintel into focus vaguely
Misted with blood (my eyes are shut)
A single garland sways, stone fruit, stone leaves,
Which years of grit had etched until it thrust
Roots down, even into the poor soil of my seeing.
When did the garland become part of me?
I ask myself, amused almost,
Then shiver once from head to toe,

Transfixed by a particular cheap engraving of garlands
Bought for a few francs long ago,
All calligraphic tendril and cross-hatched rondure,

Ten years ago, and crumpled up to stanch
Boughs dripping, whose white gestures filled a cab,
And thought of neither then nor since.
Also, to clasp them, the small, red-nailed hand
Of no one I can place. Wait. No. Her name, her features
Lie toppled underneath that year's fashions.
The words she must have spoken, setting her face
To fluttering like a veil, I cannot hear now,
Let alone understand.

So that I am already on the stair,
As it were, of where I lived,
When the whole structure shudders at my tread
And soundlessly collapses, filling
The air with motes of stone.
Onto the still erect building next door
Are pressed levels and hues—
Pocked rose, streaked greens, brown whites.
Who drained the pousse-café?
Wires and pipes, snapped off at the roots, quiver.

Well, that is what life does. I stare
A moment longer, so. And presently
The massive volume of the world
Closes again.

Upon that book I swear
To abide by what it teaches:
Gospels of ugliness and waste,
Of towering voids, of soiled gusts,
Of a shrieking to be faced

Full into, eyes astream with cold—

With cold?
All right then. With self-knowledge.

Indoors at last, the pages of *Time* are apt
To open, and the illustrated mayor of New York,
Given a glimpse of how and where I work,
To note yet one more house that can be scrapped.

Unwillingly I picture
My walls weathering in the general view.
It is not even as though the new
Buildings did very much for architecture.

Suppose they did. The sickness of our time requires
That these as well be blasted in their prime.
You would think the simple fact of having lasted
Threatened our cities like mysterious fires.

There are certain phrases which to use in a poem
Is like rubbing silver with quicksilver. Bright
But facile, the glamour deadens overnight.
For instance, how 'the sickness of our time'

Enhances, then debases, what I feel.
At my desk I swallow in a glass of water
No longer cordial, scarcely wet, a pill
They had told me not to take until much later.

With the result that back into my imagination
The city glides, like cities seen from the air,
Mere smoke and sparkle to the passenger
Having in mind another destination

Which now is not that honey-slow descent
Of the Champs-Elysées, her hand in his,
But the dull need to make some kind of house
Out of the life lived, out of the love spent.

FROM A NOTEBOOK

The whiteness near and far.
The cold, the hush. . . .
A first word stops
The blizzard, steps
Out into fresh
Candor. You ask no more.

Each never taken stride
Leads onward, though
In circles ever
Smaller, smaller.
The vertigo
Upholds you. And now to glide

Across the frozen pond,
Steelshod, to chase
Its dreamless oval
With loop and spiral
Until (your face
Downshining, lidded, drained

Of any need to know
What hid, what called,
Wisdom or error,
Beneath that mirror)
The page you scrawled
Turns. A new day. Fresh snow.

A VISION OF THE GARDEN

One winter morning as a child
Upon the windowpane's thin frost I drew
Forehead and eyes and mouth the clear and mild
Features of nobody I knew

And then abstracted looking through
This or that wet transparent line
Beyond beheld a winter garden so
Heavy with snow its hedge of pine

And sun so brilliant on the snow
I breathed my pleasure out onto the chill pane
Only to see its angel fade in mist.
I was a child, I did not know

That what I longed for would resist
Neither what cold lines should my finger trace
On colder grounds before I found anew
In yours the features of that face

Whose words whose looks alone undo
Such frosts I lay me down in love in fear
At how they melt become a blossoming pear
Joy outstretched in our bodies' place.

POEM OF SUMMER'S END

The morning of the equinox
Begins with brassy clouds and cocks.
All the inn's shutters clatter wide
Upon Fair Umbria. Twitching at my side
You burrow in sleep like a red fox.

Mostly, these weeks, we toss all night, we touch
By accident. The heat! The food!
Groggily aware of spots that itch
I curse the tiny creatures which
Have flecked our mended sheets with blood.

At noon in a high wind, to bell and song,
Upon the shoulders of the throng,
The gilt bronze image of St. So-and-So
Heaves precipitously along.
Worship has worn away his toe,

Nevertheless the foot, thrust forward, dips
Again, again, into its doom of lips
And tears, a vortex of black shawls,
Garlic, frankincense, Popery, festivals
Held at the moon's eclipse,

As in their trance the faithful pass
On to piazza and café.
We go deliberately the other way
Through the town gates, lie down in grass.
But the wind howls, the sky turns color-of-clay.

The time for making love is done.
A far off, sulphur-pale façade
Gleams and goes out. It is as though by one
Flash of lightning all things made
Had glimpsed their maker's heart, read and obeyed.

Back on our bed of iron and lace
We listen to the loud rain fracture space,
And let at first each other's hair
Be lost in gloom, then lips, then the whole face.
If either speaks the other does not hear.

For a decade love has rained down
On our two hearts, instructing them
In a strange bareness, that of weathered stone.
Thinking how bare our hearts have grown
I do not know if I feel pride or shame.

The time has passed to go and eat.
Has it? I do not know. A beam of light
Reveals you calm but strangely white.
A final drop of rain clicks in the street.
Somewhere a clock strikes. It is not too late

To set out dazed, sit side by side
In the one decent restaurant.
The handsome boy who has already tried
To interest you (and been half gratified)
Helps us to think of what we want.

I do not know—have I ever known?—
Unless concealed in the next town,
In the next image blind with use, a clue,
A worn path, points the long way round back to
The springs we started out from. Sun

Weaker each sunrise reddens that slow maze
So freely entered. Now come days
When lover and beloved know
That love is what they are and where they go.

Each learns to read at length the other's gaze.

AFTER GREECE

Light into the olive entered
And was oil. Rain made the huge pale stones
Shine from within. The moon turned his hair white
Who next stepped from between the columns,
Shielding his eyes. All through
The countryside were old ideas
Found lying open to the elements.
Of the gods' houses only
A minor premise here and there
Would be balancing the heaven of fixed stars
Upon a Doric capital. The rest
Lay spilled, their fluted drums half sunk in cyclamen
Or deep in water's biting clarity
Which just barely upheld me
The next week, when I sailed for home.
But where is home—these walls?
These limbs? The very spaniel underfoot
Races in sleep, toward what?
It is autumn. I did not invite
Those guests, windy and brittle, who drink my liquor.
Returning from a walk I find
The bottles filled with spleen, my room itself
Smeared by reflection onto the far hemlocks.
I some days flee in dream
Back to the exposed porch of the maidens
Only to find my great-great-grandmothers
Erect there, peering
Into a globe of red Bohemian glass.
As it swells and sinks, I call up
Graces, Furies, Fates, removed
To my country's warm, lit halls, with rivets forced

Through drapery, and nothing left to bear.
They seem anxious to know
What holds up heaven nowadays.
I start explaining how in that vast fire
Were other irons—well, Art, Public Spirit,
Ignorance, Economics, Love of Self,
Hatred of Self, a hundred more,
Each burning to be felt, each dedicated
To sparing us the worst; how I distrust them
As I should have done those ladies; how I want
Essentials: salt, wine, olive, the light, the scream—
No! I have scarcely named you,
And look, in a flash you stand full-grown before me,
Row upon row, Essentials,
Dressed like your sister caryatids
Or tombstone angels jealous of their dead,
With undulant coiffures, lips weathered, cracked by grime,
And faultless eyes gone blank beneath the immense
Zinc and gunmetal northern sky . . .
Stay then. Perhaps the system
Calls for spirits. This first glass I down
To the last time
I ate and drank in that old world. May I
Also survive its meanings, and my own.

It is still early, yet
Clear waves of heat,
Eye-watering, dilute
What powers drive
The warped pine to the brink.
You, too, must conquer
Involuntary nausea
Before you look. Far under-
foot are your wept-over
Sunsets, your every year
Deepened perspectives, layer
On monstrous layer of mouse,
Marigold, madder—
All petrifying, not
To be approached without
Propitiatory oohs.
By all means undertake
A descent on gargoyle-faced ass-back
To the degrading yellow
River. This first mistake
Made by your country is also
The most sublime.
Now let its convulsions
Mimic your heart's
And you will guess the source.
Be strong then. Find no fault
With the white-wigged, the quartz-
Pated up there, wrapped
In whipping vestments, neither
Man can corrupt
Nor heaven wholly melt.

They have sat a long time
In one of our highest courts.

Having lately taken up residence
In a suite of chambers
Windless, compact and sunny, ideal
Lodging for the pituitary gland of Euclid
If not for a "single gentleman (references),"
You have grown used to the playful inconveniences,
The floors that slide from under you helter-skelter,
Invisible walls put up in mid-
Stride, leaving you warped for the rest of the day,
A spoon in water; also that pounce
Of wild color from corner to page,
Straightway consuming the latter
Down to your very signature,
After which there is nothing to do but retire,
Licking the burn, into—into—
Look: (Heretofore
One could have said where one was looking,
In or out. But now it almost—) Look:
You dreamed of this:
To fuse in borrowed fires, to drown
In depths that were not there. You meant
To rest your bones in a maroon plush box,
Doze the old vaudeville out, of mind and object,
Little foreseeing their effect on you,
Those dagger-eyed insatiate performers
Who from the first false insight
To the most recent betrayal of outlook,
Crystal, hypnotic atom,
Have held you rapt, the proof, the child
Wanted by neither. Now and then
It is given to see clearly. There

Is what remains ofyou, a body
Unshaven, flung on the sofa. Stains of egg
Harden about the mouth, smoke still
Rises between fingers or from nostrils.
The eyes deflect the stars through years of vacancy.
Your agitation at such moments
Is all too human. You and the stars
Seem both endangered, each
At the other's utter mercy. Yet the gem
Revolves in space, the vision shuttles off.
A toneless waltz glints through the pea-sized funhouse.
The day is breaking someone else's heart.

FOR PROUST

Over and over something would remain
Unbalanced in the painful sum of things.
Past midnight you arose, rang for your things.
You had to go into the world again.

You stop for breath outside the lit hotel,
A thin spoon bitter stimulants will stir.
Jean takes your elbow, Jacques your coat. The stir
Spreads—you are known to all the personnel—

As through packed public rooms you press (impending
Palms, chandeliers, orchestras, more palms,
The fracas and the fragrance) until your palms
Are moist with fear that you will miss the friend

Conjured—but she is waiting: a child still
At first glance, hung with fringes, on the low
Ottoman. In a voice reproachful and low
She says she understands you have been ill.

And you, because your time is running out,
Laugh in denial and begin to phrase
Your questions. There had been a little phrase
She hummed, you could not sleep tonight without

Hearing again. Then, of that day she had sworn
To come, and did not, was evasive later,
Would she not speak the truth two decades later,
From loving-kindness learned if not inborn?

She treats you to a look you cherished, light,
Bold: '*Mon ami*, how did we get along
At all, those years?' But in her hair a long
White lock has made its truce with appetite.

And presently she rises. Though in pain
You let her leave—the loved one always leaves.
What of the little phrase? Its notes, like leaves
In the strong tea you have contrived to drain,

Strangely intensify what you must do.
Back where you came from, up the strait stair, past
All understanding, bearing the whole past,
Your eyes grown wide and dark, eyes of a Jew,

You make for one dim room without contour
And station yourself there, beyond the pale
Of cough or of gardenia, erect, pale.
What happened is becoming literature.

Feverish in time, if you suspend the task,
An old, old woman shuffling in to draw
Curtains, will read a line or two, withdraw.
The world will have put on a thin gold mask.

SCENES OF CHILDHOOD *for Claude Fredericks*

My mother's lamp once out,
I press a different switch:
A field within the dim
White screen ignites,
Vibrating to the rapt
Mechanical racket
Of a real noon field's
Crickets and gnats.

And to its candid heart
I move with heart ajar,
With eyes that smart less
From pollen or heat
Than from the buried day
Now rising like a moon,
Shining, unwinding
Its taut white sheet.

Two or three bugs that lit
Earlier upon the blank
Sheen, all peaceable
Insensibility, drowse
As she and I cannot
Under the risen flood
Of thirty years ago—
A tree, a house

We had then, a late sun,
A door from which the primal
Figures jerky and blurred
As lightning bugs

From lanterns issue, next
To be taken for stars,
For fates. With knowing smiles
And beaded shrugs

My mother and two aunts
Loom on the screen. Their plucked
Brows pucker, their arms encircle
One another.
Their ashen lips move.
From the love seat's gloom
A quiet chuckle escapes
My white-haired mother

To see in that final light
A man's shadow mount
Her dress. And now she is
Advancing, sister-
less, but followed by
A fair child, or fury—
Myself at four, in tears.
I raise my fist,

Strike, she kneels down. The man's
Shadow afflicts us both.
Her voice behind me says
It might go slower.
I work dials, the film jams.
Our headstrong old projector
Glares at the scene which promptly
Catches fire.

Puzzled, we watch ourselves
Turn red and black, gone up
In a puff of smoke now coiling
Down fierce beams.
I switch them off. A silence.
Your father, she remarks,
Took those pictures; later
Says pleasant dreams,

Rises and goes. Alone
I gradually fade and cool.
Night scatters me with green
Rustlings, thin cries.
Out there between the pines
Have begun shining deeds,
Some low, inconstant (these
Would be fireflies),

Others as in high wind
Aflicker, staying lit.
There are nights we seem to ride
With cross and crown
Forth under them, through fumes,
Coils, the whole rattling epic—
Only to leap clear-eyed
From eiderdown,

Asleep to what we'd seen.
Father already fading—
Who focused your life long
Through little frames,

Whose microscope, now deep
In purple velvet, first
Showed me the skulls of flies,
The fur, the flames

Etching the jaws—father:
Shrunken to our true size.
Each morning, back of us,
Fields wail and shimmer.
To go out is to fall
Under fresh spells, cool web
And stinging song new-hatched
Each day, all summer.

A minute galaxy
About my head will easily
Needle me back. The day's
Inaugural *Damn*
Spoken, I start to run,
Inane, like them, but breathing
In and out the sun
And air I am.

The son and heir! In the dark
It makes me catch my breath
And hear, from upstairs, hers—
That faintest hiss
And slither, as of life
Escaping into space,
Having led its characters
To the abyss

Of night. Immensely still
The heavens glisten. One broad
Path of vague stars is floating
Off, a shed skin
Of all whose fine cold eyes
First told us, locked in ours:
You are the heroes without name
Or origin.

THE LAWN FETE OF HOMUNCULUS ARTIFEX

for Fred and Sandra Segal

Moisten me, press me,
Mold me to tumbler, to tin,
The shallow, the tall, confuse me
With straw and leave me
Where sun is hottest, patted into hills.
Do not forget this bit of mirror:
Half buried in my breast, it will store up
The white blues and the yellow blues of skies
Under which one dreams of living.
There, it is done! Meanwhile
The dishes shall be ceremoniously dotted
With petal of geranium, berries or pebbles,
That there may arise from them
An illusion of food and drink,
A hunger then, a zest for life
Peculiar to those not quite alive,
Who only dream of living, who are not born
In childbed, rather in some hour tense with charms
Glancing off the alembic's giant scrotum
Till sun and moon conjoin, and all is dark
As the wizard's robe, as his drenched brow.
When he could do no more
He fell back spent. Our little party
Got under way as best it could. The twigs
Unclenched, the greedy rosebuds caked with smut.
The ill-knit creatures, now in hues
Of sunstroke, mulberry, white of clown,
Yellow of bile, bruise-blacks-and-blues,
Stumped outward, waving matchstick arms,
Colliding, poking, hurt, in tears

(For the wound became an eye)
Toward the exciting, hostile greens
And the spread cloths of Art.
Already openly in love
With what he saw, one of us disregarded
Common background or future union
Through dissolution in the first real rain
Enough to cry, addressing who
Or what he could not say, "Invest me
With nuance, place on me
Your conical hat of stars,
Hand me the hazel wand
That was my hand—
It stirs! It bends!
When I am base again, and my name mud,
You'll have this likeness of me with a dozen
Of my three billion closest friends."

Letting his wisdom be the whole of love,
The father tiptoes out, backwards. A gleam
Falls on the child awake and wearied of,

Then, as the door clicks shut, is snuffed. The glove-
Gray afterglow appalls him. It would seem
That letting wisdom be the whole of love

Were pastime even for the bitter grove
Outside, whose owl's white hoot of disesteem
Falls on the child awake and wearied of.

He lies awake in pain, he does not move,
He will not scream. Any who heard him scream
Would let their wisdom be the whole of love.

People have filled the room he lies above.
Their talk, mild variation, chilling theme,
Falls on the child. Awake and wearied of

Mere pain, mere wisdom also, he would have
All the world waking from its winter dream,
Letting its wisdom be. The whole of love
Falls on the child awake and wearied of.

CHILDLESSNESS

The weather of this winter night, my dream-wife
Ranting and raining, wakes me. Her cloak blown back
To show the lining's dull lead foil
Sweeps along asphalt. Houses
Look blindly on; one glimmers through a blind.
Outside, I hear her tricklings
Arraign my little plot:
Had it or not agreed
To transplantation for the common good
Of certain rare growths yielding guaranteed
Gold pollen, gender of suns, large, hardy,
Enviable blooms? But in my garden
Nothing is planted. Neither
Is that glimmering window mine.
I lie and think about the rain,
How it has been drawn up from the impure ocean,
From gardens lightly, deliberately tainted;
How it falls back, time after time,
Through poisons visible at sunset
When the enchantress, masked as friend, unfurls
Entire bolts of voluminous pistachio,
Saffron, and rose.
These, as I fall back to sleep,
And other slow colors clothe me, glide
To rest, then burst along my limbs like buds,
Like bombs from the navigator's vantage,
Waking me, lulling me. Later I am shown
The erased metropolis reassembled
On sampans, freighted each
With toddlers, holy dolls, dead ancestors.
One tiny monkey puzzles over fruit.

The vision rises and falls, the garland
Gently takes root
In the sea's coma. Hours go by
Before I can stand to own
A sky stained red, a world
Clad only in rags, threadbare,
Dabbling the highway's ice with blood.
A world. The cloak thrown down for it to wear
In token of past servitude
Has fallen onto the shoulders of my parents
Whom it is eating to the bone.

GETTING THROUGH

I wrote the postcard to you and went out
Through melting snow to mail it. Old Miss Tree
Buttonholed me at the corner with something about
Today being our last chance. Indeed? Well, well,
Not hers and mine, I trusted gallantly,
Disengaging her knuckle from my lapel.

First thing on entering the Post Office,
I made out through my pigeonhole's dim pane
An envelope from you. Cheered up by this,
Card between teeth, I twirled the dials; they whirred
But the lock held. One, two, three times. In vain.
At the stamp window I called for Mr. Bird,

Our friendly Postmaster. Not a soul replied.
Bags of mail lay in heaps, lashed shut, the late
Snowlight upon them. When at last I tried
To avail myself of the emergency stamp machine,
A cancelled 20 franc imperforate
From Madagascar slid out, mocking, green.

Nerves, I thought, wishing more than ever now
You had not gone away, considering mailing
My card unstamped, presuming that somehow. . . .
What's this! Your envelope lies at my feet,
Ripped open, empty, my name running, paling
From snow tracked in by me. Outside, Main Street

Is empty—no: a Telephone Company truck.
Why, I can phone! The mere sound of my voice
Will melt you, help decide you to come back.

But as I hurry home a water drop
Stops me, then little rainbow husks of ice—
From the telephone pole. There at the shivering top

Two men in rubber boots are cutting wires
Which heavily dangle from a further pole.
(Oh, May Day ribbons! Child our town attires
As Queen in tablecloth and paper crown,
Lurching down Main Street blindly as a mole!)
When the last wire is severed I lurch down

The street myself, my blankness exquisite.
Beyond a juniper hedge sits Mrs. Stone,
Mute on her dazzling lawn. Bracing to sit
In such fresh snow, I brightly call. Her hard
Gaze holds me like amber. I drop my own,
And find I cannot now read the postcard

Still in my grasp, unspotted and uncrushed.
My black inkstrokes hover intensely still
Against the light—starlings gunshot has flushed
That hover one split second, so, then veer
Away for good. The trees weep, as trees will.
Everything is cryptic, crystal-queer.

The stationery store's brow drips, ablaze
Where the pink sun has struck it with the hand
Of one remembering after days and days—
Remembering what? I am a fool, a fool!
I hear with joy, helpless to understand
Cries of snow-crimson children leaving school.

FIVE OLD FAVORITES

1. *A Dream of Old Vienna*

The mother sits, the whites of her eyes tinted
By a gas lamp of red Bohemian glass.
Her one gray lock could be a rosy fireworks.
She hums the galop from Lehár's Requiem Mass.

Deepening a blood-red handkerchief the father
Has drawn over his face, the warm beams wreathe
Its foldings into otherworldly features
Now and then stirred lightly from beneath.

The child, because of his extreme pallor,
Acquires a normal look as the lamp glows,
For which the mother is and is not grateful,
Torn between conflicting libidos.

To wed the son when he has slain the father,
Or thrust the brat *at once* into the damp . . . ?
Such are the throbbing issues that enliven
Many a cozy evening round the lamp.

2. *The Midnight Snack*

When I was little and he was riled
It never entered my father's head
Not to flare up, roar and turn red.
Mother kept cool and smiled.

Now every night I tiptoe straight
Through my darkened kitchen for
The refrigerator door—
It opens, the inviolate!

Illumined as in dreams I take
A glass of milk, a piece of cake,
Then stealthily retire,

Mindful of how the gas stove's black-
Browed pilot eye's blue fire
Burns into my turned back.

3. *Sundown and Starlight*

He licks the tallest tree, and takes a bite.
His day's excess has left him flushed and limp. Then, too,
It is time she changed for the evening. Hadn't she better
Be thinking what to wear? Nothing seems quite

To match her mood. Women! She must consider
One dress after another of pale or fiery hue.
At the hour's end, as foreseen, her favorite dark blue
Comes fold by fold out of its chest of cedar.

His jaws have closed on the tree's base.
Moments like this, he turns into a compulsive eater.
Men! Let him burn all night. She has other things to do
Than care for him. She opens her jewel case.

4. *Event without Particulars*

Something will be hanging from the ceiling—
A dagger fern in chains? Shroud of a chandelier?
One feebly blinking bulb? Be that as it may,
Something you notice right away.

Something will decorate the wall—a calendar?
A looking-glass? A scorched place? One never can say.
And something lie on the table—a teacup or book
You may care to read if you dare to look.

Then comes the opening of the door.
Somebody enters—young, face deep in a nosegay,
Or with a drink, or a crutch and milk-blind eyes.
In any case *you will rise*

And go to her over whatever is underfoot
To make you feel at home, since you have come to stay—
Black and white marble might be used for some;
For others, roses of linoleum.

5. *The Dandelion Sermon*

In the heat of a sentence I stopped. You waited
Complacently, but the mind
Had been breathed upon at last.
Innumerable feathery particles rose in less than wind

Out over the nude waters where both suns
Fierily, the reflected and the seen,
Strove to be one, then perhaps were, within
A white haze not at once or ever with ease construed.

ROGER CLAY'S PROPOSAL

I may be oversusceptible to news
But what I see in the papers leaves me numb.
The bomb. The ultimatum. Wires hum—
Adult impersonators giving interviews,

As if that helped. What would? I've thought of it.
With all due ceremony—flags unfurled,
Choirs, priests—the leaders of a sobered world
Should meet, kneel down, and, joining hands, submit

To execution: say in Rome or Nice—
Towns whose economy depends on crowds.
Ah, but those boys, their heads aren't in the clouds.
They would find reasons not to die for peace.

Damn them. I'd give *my* life. Each day I meet
Men like me, young, indignant. We're not cranks.
Will some of them step up? That's plenty. Thanks.
Now let's move before we get cold feet.

Music we'll need, and short, clear speeches given
Days of maximum coverage in the press.
We'll emphasize disinterestedness,
Drive the point home that someone could be driven

To do this. Where to go? Why not Japan,
Land of the honorable suicide.
And will the world change heart? Until we've tried,
No one can say it will not. No one can.

Up from the ranks a body volunteers
For the difficult assignment, hears
That it may not come back, smartly replies
Far better I than you, Sir. Tears
Spring to the General's eyes.

The body now dons a disguise
That turns it thin and sallow. It is gowned
In white, and given to memorize
Things to be heard by none but a renowned
Leader of the Underground.

Fevers. Vigils. Not till the sixth moon's
Dead shimmer gloats upon the last
River struggled across, is the pigeon released
Whose return to Headquarters invariably means
Mission Accomplished.

The General stiffens. He began
As a young officer learning strategy,
Also the languages of flower and fan.
In those days would he have made so free
With the life of any man?

Dully he lifts a gloved fist to his face.
The tears however do not fall.
Too few are left and he will need them all
Now word has come of an unassailable place
Far from the sirens' call.

When I was four or so
I used to read aloud
To you—I mean, recite
Stories both of us knew
By heart, the book held close
To even then nearsighted
Eyes. It was morning. You,
Still in your nightgown
Over cold tea, would nod
Approval. Once I caught
A gay note in your quiet:
The book was upside down.

Now all is upside down.
I sit while you babble.
I watch your sightless face
Jerked swiftly here and there,
Set in a puzzled frown.
Your face! It is no more yours
Than its reflected double
Bobbing on scummed water.
Other days, the long pure
Sobs break from a choked source
Nobody here would dare
Fathom, even if able.

With you no longer able,
I tried to keep apart,
At first, or to set right
The stories you would tell.
The European trip,
The fire of 1908—

I could reel them off in sleep,
Given a phrase to start;
Chimneys of kerosene
Lamps only you could clean
Because your hands were small . . .
I have them all by heart

But cannot now find heart
To hinder them from growing
Together, wrong, absurd.
Do as you must, poor stranger.
There is no surer craft
To take you where you are going
—A story I have heard
And shall over and over
Till you are indeed gone.
Last night the mockingbird
Wept and laughed, wept and laughed,
Telling it to the moon.

Your entire honeymoon,
A ride in a rowboat
On the St. Johns River,
Took up an afternoon.
And by that time, of course,
The water hyacinth
Had come here from Japan,
A mauve and rootless guest
Thirsty for life, afloat
With you on the broad span
It would in sixty years
So vividly congest.

ANNIE HILL'S GRAVE

Amen. The casket like a spaceship bears her
In streamlined, airtight comfort underground.
Necropolis is a nice place to visit;
One would not want to live there all year round.

So think the children of its dead, emerging
From shadow by the small deep gates of clay,
Exclaiming softly, joyful if bewildered,
To see each other rouged, heads bald or gray.

Some have not met, though constant to the City,
For decades. Now their slowly sunnier
Counterclockwise movement, linked and loving,
Slackens the whirlpool that has swallowed her.

Alone, she grips, against confusion, pictures
Of us the living, and of the tall youth
She wed but has not seen for thirty summers.
Used to the dark, he lies in the next booth,

Part of that whole, poor, overpopulated
Land of our dreams, that 'instant' space
—To have again, just add stars, wind, and water—
Shrinkingly broached. And, as the brief snail-trace

Of her withdrawal dries upon our faces
The silence drums into her upturned face.

ANGEL

Above my desk, whirring and self-important
(Though not much larger than a hummingbird)
In finely woven robes, school of Van Eyck,
Hovers an evidently angelic visitor.
He points one index finger out the window
At winter snatching to its heart,
To crystal vacancy, the misty
Exhalations of houses and of people running home
From the cold sun pounding on the sea;
While with the other hand
He indicates the piano
Where the Sarabande No. 1 lies open
At a passage I shall never master
But which has already, and effortlessly, mastered me.
He drops his jaw as if to say, or sing,
'Between the world God made
And this music of Satie,
Each glimpsed through veils, but whole,
Radiant and willed,
Demanding praise, demanding surrender,
How can you sit there with your notebook?
What do you think you are doing?'
However he says nothing—wisely: I could mention
Flaws in God's world, or Satie's; and for that matter
How did he come by *his* taste for Satie?
Half to tease him, I turn back to my page,
Its phrases thus far clotted, unconnected.
The tiny angel shakes his head.
There is no smile on his round, hairless face.
He does not want even these few lines written.

TO A BUTTERFLY

Already in midsummer
I miss your feet and fur.
Poor simple creature that you were,
What have you become!

Your slender person curled
About an apple twig
Rebounding to the winds' clear jig
Gave up the world

In favor of obscene
Gray matter, rode that ark
Until (as at the chance remark
Of Father Sheen)

Shining awake to slough
Your old life. And soon four
Dapper stained glass windows bore
You up—ENOUGH.

Goodness, how tired one grows
Just looking through a prism:
Allegory, symbolism.
I've tried, Lord knows,

To keep from seeing double,
Blushed for whenever I did,
Prayed like a boy my cheek be hid
By manly stubble.

I caught you in a net
And first pierced your disguise
How many years ago? Time flies,
I am not yet

Proof against rigmarole.
Those frail wings, those antennae!
The day you hover without any
Tincture of soul,

Red monarch, swallowtail,
Will be the day my own
Wiles gather dust. Each will have flown
The other's jail.

THE PARROT FISH

The shadow of the little fishing launch
Discreetly, inch by inch,
Crept after us on its belly over
The reef's uneven floor.

The motor gasped out drowsy vapor.
Seconds went by before
Anyone thought to interpret
The jingling of Inez's bracelet.

Chalk-violet, olive, all veils and sequins, a
Priestess out of the next Old Testament extravaganza,
With round gold eyes and minuscule buck-teeth,
Up flaunted into death

The parrot fish. And for a full hour beat
Irregular, passionate
Tattoos from its casket lined with zinc.
Finally we understood, I think.

Ashore, the warm waves licked our feet.
One or two heavy chords the heat
Struck, set the white beach vibrating.
And throwing back its head the sea began to sing.

When our son died
We cured his little frame,
Scoured, pickled, overlaid head to toe
The ultimate forged antique
With augmentingly non-literal translations
Into gold, of the boy, into alabaster,
His face's full moon setting
Beneath an earth chewed bare by beetles,
And all at length, with tutors and possessions
Packed into a gold—into *four* gold
Garages at the heart
Of four three-sided glassy slopes
Upheaved through layers of blue and yellow gas.
The gods our cousins were reduced
To looking on, bird-eyed or jackal-eyed,
His guests who had been theirs.
My sister and I stood
As we stand now, in red
Granite, chins high, fists drugged
Upon symbols of rank. We must
Apparently have felt
Shock of a sort. We are shown taking
A rigid backward step
Into this world of giant papyrus-sheaves,
Sunwashed, pitted with inventory.
It was 'the dawn of history.'
Do not judge us unkindly, friend
Whose heart still beats and bleeds.
States noway known till we induced them
Propel one bride and groom, your autumn night,
Into the living area

Of a first apartment. Openarmed,
Goat-footed chairs the worm has drilled,
A quarter year been traded to possess,
In the bronze glow of missiles become lamps
Receive the pair. His cup
Poured, sweetened, her small voice goes on:
Each day should be *composed*,
Should have 'shape' and 'texture'—living was an art! . . .
He nods, on fire. Back of her fair young face
Is hung her other, her unchanging face
Launched free of earth between sun-whitened waves.
Her slaves, his senses, rend their clothing.
Eyes she will never look through look through him
To chill themselves in a transparence
On whose far side, all night
Enthralled, press wings, press tiny wings.
Illumined therefore unbudging, we rule here.
Exerting no pressure. Only
When stones he gave her, that will cost one year,
Glitter, glittering back.
Too late the ritual of blinds.
Both now, as all before them, have seen us—grown
Taller than buildings, masked in magnets,
Traffic of stars, the myriad needles plunged
Green into that arterial heaven
Our loss, which is your gain.

It was going to rain.
Beneath his scalp
The silver ached. He got
With no one's help
To his feet. A cane
Steadied him up the stair.

It was warm there
On the sleeping porch.
His jacket hung
Over a chair would not
Let go his form.
He placed his round gold watch,

Unwound, among
Dimes, quarters, lunatic change . . .
He woke in bed,
Missing his spectacles.
He felt the strange
Palms laid on his forehead.

Then he heard other palms
Rattling in wind.
More time passed. He had dreams.
In one, rain fell
And fell, and when
The sun rose near at hand

Stood his life gleaming full.
The bubble-beaded
Tumbler magnified

A false and grinning friend
No longer needed.
He turned his face and died.

SWIMMING BY NIGHT

A light going out in the forehead
Of the house by the ocean,
Into warm black its feints of diamond fade.
Without clothes, without caution

Plunging past gravity—
Wait! Where before
Had been floating nothing, is a gradual body
Half remembered, astral with phosphor,

Yours, risen from its tomb
In your own mind,
Haunting nimbleness, glimmerings a random
Spell had kindled. So that, new-limned

By this weak lamp
The evening's alcohol will feed
Until the genie chilling bids you limp
Heavily over stones to bed,

You wear your master's robe
One last time, the far break
Of waves, their length and sparkle, the spinning globe
You wear, and the star running down his cheek.

A TENANCY

for David Jackson

Something in the light of this March afternoon
Recalls that first and dazzling one
Of 1946. I sat elated
In my old clothes, in the first of several
Furnished rooms, head cocked for the kind of sound
That is recognized only when heard.
A fresh snowfall muffled the road, unplowed
To leave blanker and brighter
The bright, blank page turned overnight.

A yellow pencil in midair
Kept sketching unfamiliar numerals,
The 9 and 6 forming a stereoscope
Through which to seize the Real
Old-Fashioned Winter of my landlord's phrase,
Through which the ponderous *idées reçues*
Of oak, velour, crochet, also the mantel's
Baby figures, value told me
In some detail at the outset, might be plumbed
For signs I should not know until I saw them.

But the objects, innocent
(As we all once were) of annual depreciation,
The more I looked grew shallower,
Pined under a luminous plaid robe
Thrown over us by the twin mullions, sashes,
And unequal oblong panes
Of windows and storm windows. These,
Washed in a rage, then left to dry unpolished,
Projected onto the inmost wall
Ghosts of the storm, like pebbles under water.

And indeed, from within, ripples
Of heat had begun visibly bearing up and away
The bouquets and wreathes of a quarter century.
Let them go, what did I want with them?
It was time to change that wallpaper!
Brittle, sallow in the new radiance,
Time to set the last wreath floating out
Above the dead, to sweep up flowers. The dance
Had ended, it was light; the men looked tired
And awkward in their uniforms.
I sat, head thrown back, and with the dried stains
Of light on my own cheeks, proposed
This bargain with—say with the source of light:
That given a few years more
(Seven or ten or, what seemed vast, fifteen)
To spend in love, in a country not at war,
I would give in return
All I had. All? A little sun
Rose in my throat. The lease was drawn.

I did not even feel the time expire.

I feel it though, today, in this new room,
Mine, with my things and thoughts, a view
Of housetops, treetops, the walls bare.
A changing light is deepening, is changing
To a gilt ballroom chair a chair
Bound to break under someone before long.
I let the light change also me.
The body that lived through that day
And the sufficient love and relative peace

Of those short years, is now not mine.
Would it be called a soul?
It knows, at any rate,
That when the light dies and the bell rings
Its leaner veteran will rise to face
Partners not recognized
Until drunk young again and gowned in changing
Flushes; and strains will rise,
The bone-tipped baton beating, rapid, faint,
From the street below, from my depressions—

From the doorbell which rings.
One foot asleep, I hop
To let my three friends in. They stamp
Themselves free of the spring's
Last snow—or so we hope.

One has brought violets in a pot;
The second, wine; the best,
His open, empty hand. Now in the room
The sun is shining like a lamp.
I put the flowers where I need them most

And then, not asking why they come,
Invite the visitors to sit.
If I am host at last
It is of little more than my own past.
May others be at home in it.

JAMES MERRILL

James Merrill was born in New York in 1926. He lives in Stonington, Connecticut, but spends part of the year traveling. He is the author of two earlier books of poems, *First Poems* (1951), and *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace* (1959); a novel, *The Seraglio* (1957); and two plays, *The Immortal Husband* (given an off-Broadway production in 1955 and published the following year in *Playbook*) and, in one act, *The Bait*, published in *Artists' Theatre* (1960).

Date Due

Due	Returned	Due	Returned
MAY 26 '69	MAY 1 1969		
	SEP 16 2001		
JUL 02 2001			

811.5
M571w
C.2

Withdrawn from UofT Libraries to Internet Archive

Water Street, poems. main
811.5M571w C.2
3 1262 03309 0357